SECRET SAUCE

ISSUE 0

The Real Magic of Skate Spots

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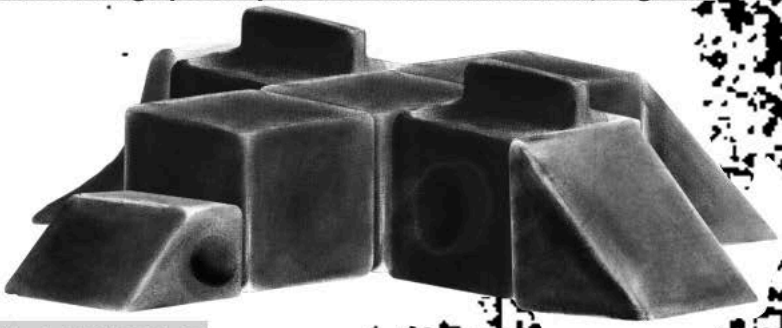

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WELCOME!

This is the very first [secret] issue of a new DIY academic journal for skate studies: Skateboarding And Urban Cultural Ecologies (SAUCE).

This is, however, not a sanctioned issue of SAUCE: no peer-review or any of the other validating processes of an academic journal legitimization have been used. Rather, this [secret] SAUCE is a raw and authentic blend of essays from some of skate studies best thinkers.

An even more raw presentation and debate over these ideas will be offered in a panel discussion by their authors on July 2, 2026 in Budweis, Czech Republic, supported by Skateholders Forum, hosted by Jakub.

Our host, Jakub, helped us formulate a set of questions about skate spots, normally defined as areas or objects in a city like a plaza or a handrail illegally appropriated by skaters for trick play. These questions are more pressing today as a new strategy of cooperating with the city to legalize skate spots or design them with support of the city has evolved. Known as "Skate Urbanism" or Civic Skateboarding, it uses political processes to produce sanctioned spaces and "skate friendly" cities, like Malmö and Bordeaux.

As Jakub's Preface asks, can Skate Urbanism produce spots as good as unsanctioned spots? Relatedly, where does the "magic" of skate spots originate? What makes skate spots legendary? How does a spot become a site for pilgrimage, a space that is fetishized, having an aura of authenticity and heritage.

Ema's paper casts a spell over these spots: they depend on dusty and dead "OLD MAGIC." To Ema, many legendary spots are creatively exhausted, spaces for nostalgic old men who might as well be feeding pigeons. 'Where's the NEW MAGIC?' It's wherever the *new* skaters skate! Break the "masculinity" mold and you break the curse of boring spots!

Harry's finds a similar power in this new magic, so powerful it can be used in old spots, like London's famous 50-year-old Undercroft at Southbank. The piss-filled crusty banks find power when a crew of newcomers crushes the spot together. This new "social" reappropriation grinds off the patina turning a new direction in skate culture more core than core.

Brian (me), defends old spot enchantment. Unsanctioned spots produce in their users a highly tuned "skater's eye," hone "city craft" skills fortifying a secret society of city users whose creative powers underwrite the pollical leverage that permits Skate Urbanism.

Finally, Ted defends the historicization of these old skate spots, as their unintended uses provide new meanings within their architectural designs and materiality. Rather than fetishized nostalgia and aura, skate spots reveal themselves to be cultural centers in seemingly abandoned city spaces, revealing previously unknown success to modernist design and materials.

We hope that this illegal issue of SAUCE invokes its own unintended creative uses in the readers, perhaps provoking new subversive ideas of their own for future issues of the journal. If so, please consider submitting your ideas at saucejournal.org.

Now let's go skate!

-Brian

Chief Editor, SAUCE Journal
Maker, Secret Sauce Zine

Zine Art by: MATEJ SELUCKÝ

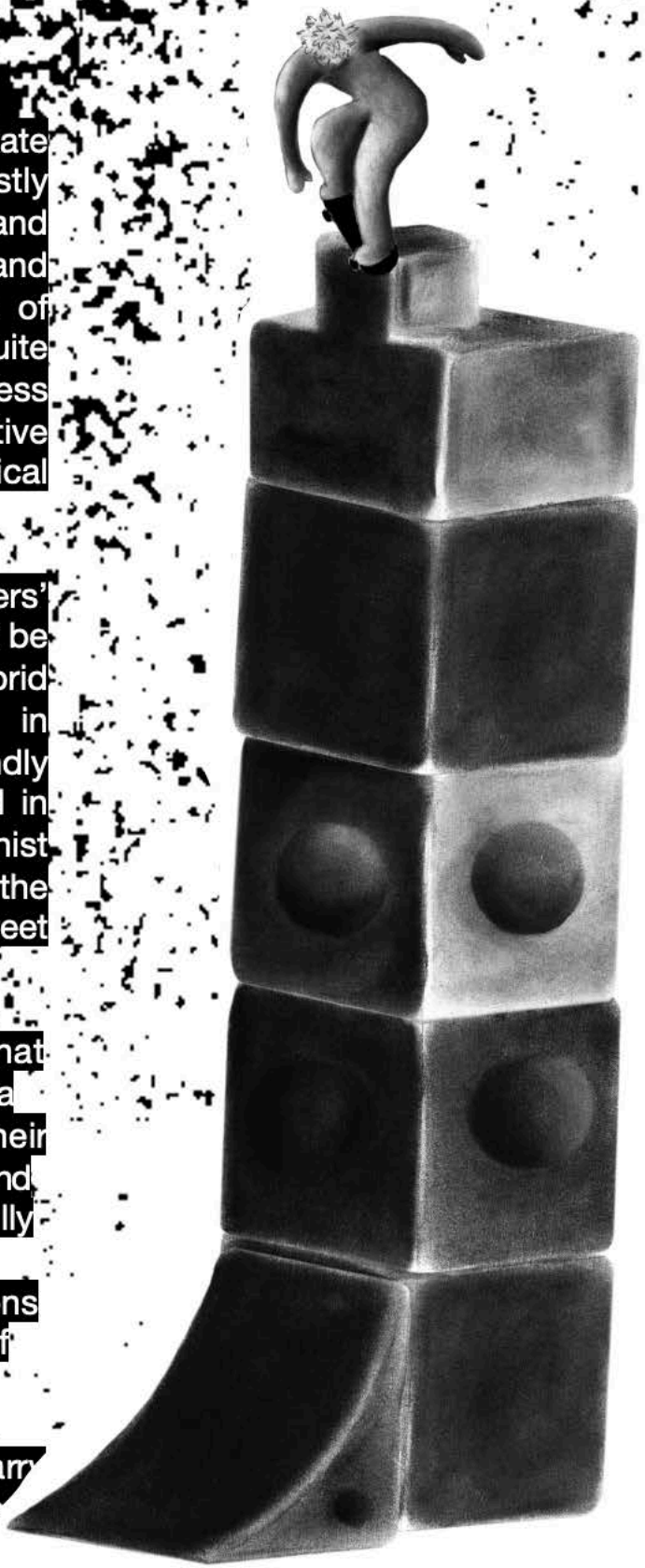
PREFACE

Jakub Novotný

What is the real magic of a skate spot? Is this magic present mostly in the so-called skaters' eye and their ability to turn neglected and undesirable spaces into sites of play? While this seems quite consensual, there might be less agreement on whether this creative magic is conditioned by its political dimension.

In other words, does skaters' reclaiming of city space need to be subversive? Are the new, hybrid skate spaces created in cooperation with skate-friendly local governments still magical in this sense, or do skate-urbanist projects eventually discredit the transgressive essence of street skating's magic?

On the contrary, could we say that these sanctioned spaces bring a new kind of magic to many of their users, who see them as safer and more welcoming than traditionally contested and gate-kept street spots? These and more questions tied to the meaning and value of *street* in skateboarding will be discussed by the most apt of thinkers –Emana Ostřížková, Harry Meadley, Brian Glenney, and Te Barrow.



The dying magic of legendary street spots [The deconstruction of legendary street spots]

Ema Ostřížková

This article aims to deconstruct the first-wave legendary street spots. It takes a historic constructivist approach and explains the legendary spots' context within the 1990s male-centered skateboarding culture and its gatekeeping tendencies. Further, it introduces multiple challenges faced by these legendary spots today, resulting in the "dying magic" of these historic sights. These challenges include: the popularity and subsequent physical damage of these spots, the heightened social media coverage and its consequences such as heavy monitoring or creative exhaustion of the legendary spots, or the devaluing of the authenticity of the "street" aspect of these spots via their legendary status. Finally, it suggests a new wave of legendary spots. It highlights the new media effect on skate culture and its decentralization and how these changes could potentially affect the form of these newly emerging legendary spots.

* * *

Many of the legendary street spots we celebrate today emerged throughout the late 1980s and 1990s along with the rise of popularity of street skateboarding and its strong connection to urbanism (Borden, 2019). These spots derived from "raw" street spots constructed without the skater's use in mind and achieved their legendary status, international recognition and subcultural meaning through acts of skateboarding (Beal, 2013). Cultural landmarks, dead spots or "zero degree architecture" such as San Francisco's Embarcadero, famous for Mark Gonzales "Gonz Gap", Philadelphia's Love Park, New York's Brooklyn Banks, London's Southbank, Lyon's 25, or plazas like MACBA in Barcelona (Borden, 2019), Kulturforum in Berlin or Stalin Plaza in Prague, were transformed by skaters into legendary sites. A location often becomes legendary the moment a skateboarder performs an unprecedented or highly dangerous trick that has never been done at that specific location, forever linking the skater's legacy to physical space (O'Connor, 2020).

Their iconic position was amplified by media coverage and association with personalities (Beal, 2013). I argue that the 1990s legendary spots were partly able to become legendary because of the form of skate videos which were produced during this period. Skate media of the early 1990s was curated by a centralized power held by traditional magazines and skate brands which released long form video parts demanding professional production and grand resources. This started shifting with the introduction of handheld camcorders like the Sony DCR-VX1000 which was released in 1995 along with editing software like Adobe Premiere in 1991 or Final Cut in 1999 (Borden, 2019).

Today, legendary spots pose not only as famous skateable monuments but also as irreplaceable documentation devices for skateboarding history. In this regard we need to consider who dominated skateboarding history-making in the 1990s. Keith Jenkins (1991) distinguishes between the past itself and history as a documented narrative. While the past is gone, history is an act, an ideologically driven construction. As such, it is "never for itself; it is always for someone" (K. Jenkins, 1991, p. 21) In the context of skateboarding, in the 1990s, history-makers were the skaters who had access to media production and media coverage because those are the ones who were documented, distributed, well archived and made into history.

Legacy/traditional media and "core" gatekeepers actively molded a marketable history that centered on white, heterosexual men, systematically erasing the contributions of non-traditional skateboarders (Willing & Pappalardo, 2023). Non-traditional skateboarders are in this sense defined as individuals who fall outside the historically dominant image of a skateboarder, meaning young women, non-binary, non-white and LGBTQ+ participants who have historically faced marginalization and exclusion from the subculture's core spaces (Willing & Pappalardo, 2023).

The first wave of legendary street spots in skateboarding served as representation and a capsule of the late 1980s and 1990s skateboarding culture. This era is often defined as a hostile environment for non-traditional skaters (Willing & Pappalardo, 2023). 1990s Skateboarding culture was dictated by hyper-masculinity, compulsory heterosexuality, misogyny or sexism towards women participants, altogether creating a very hostile environment with specific criteria for meeting the subculture's standard (Abulhawa, 2020). These criteria posed as barriers of entry (Willing & Pappalardo, 2023).

A direct representation of this hostility is the accessibility of these legendary spots and their subsequent gatekeeping. Multiple questions arise: Who gets to skate these legendary spots? Who feels appropriate while skating these legendary spots? Legendary spots are gatekept by their difficulty, by keeping them "a secret" and therefore making them physically unavailable to everyday skaters or by the intimidation of "visitors" by local "core" skaters that determine who is "worthy" to skate the legendary spot (Borden, 2019).

Nowadays, legendary skatespots are often being used for skate tourism as a monument to visit on a skater's next vacation. Filming a trick at their favourite legendary spot can be a very satisfactory event (O'Connor, 2020), though this god-like position of legendary spots may be harming them in the long run.

I would like to add the idea of "dying magic" of old legendary spots as their legendary status faces multiple challenges. The "legendary" status itself can be a damaging factor of the street spot itself. It has to withstand much more wear and tear from being subject to skate tourism, therefore interfering with the theoretical preservation of these historical skateboarding sights (Borden, 2019) The damaging of street spots is caused by the grinding of metal trucks, repeated board slamming on the ground or continuous waxing of the edges. As a result, legendary spots are often deliberately demolished, such as Carlsbad Gap in California, or permanently blocked, such as the "Leap of Faith" in San Diego (O'Connor, 2020).

The post 2000 evolution of the skateboarding culture has brought more inclusivity and representation to the culture. The culture's inclusivity accelerated with the introduction of new media and "participatory culture" (H. Jenkins, 2009) which led to the decentralization of representation in the hands of "producers" (Bruns, 2009). Digital spaces allowed non-traditional skaters bypass traditional gatekeepers and their "symbolic annihilation" (Tuchman, 1978). Skateboarding found its digital presence on skateboarding websites, YouTube and later on Instagram (Borden, 2019; Willing & Pappalardo, 2023). This strong presence further challenges the legendary spots.

Representation comes with more video coverage of legendary spots which on one hand solidifies their importance in the culture it also devalues these spots due to their overuse in skate media. When a legendary spot is heavily documented, it can attract heavy monitoring by security or creatively exhaust the location, forcing skaters to seek other street spots (Borden, 2019). This popularity and oversaturation of media coverage can also potentially lead to them not being considered "real street" anymore, as "real street" is legitimized by skateboarding being the location's unintended use (McDuie-Ra, 2021). I argue that if a spot becomes frequently skated, it loses this mis-use value. Therefore, in the perspective of valuing street videos over park/hybrid videos by the "core" skate community, their "legendary" position, originally built on the "raw street" authenticity, may start to shift.

Social media presence decentralizes skateboarding by allowing skaters to bypass gatekeepers of the industry (Dupont, 2020). It highlights new and more diverse

skateboarders than traditional skate media and pushes skateboarding in difficulty and style into its new form (Willing & Pappalardo, 2023). It also paves way for new spots to be discovered and for a bigger amount of spots to steal the spotlight (Borden, 2019). With new media and more decentralized media coverage of skateboarding, the spots which are represented are becoming as diverse as the skaters shredding them.

Legendary street spots have their own valuable position in the skate community. But just as the first generation of these spots emerged, they will also vanish one day, as nothing is permanent. The question that comes to mind is: Will there be a new wave of legendary street spots? And if so, how will they differ from the first wave?

With the current generation of more diverse skateboarders, new legendary spots could emerge representing the different styles and preferences that this generation brings. Skateboarding's position is changing. It is interacting more with the mainstream/normative/dominant culture, for example by the institutionalization of skateboarding or its addition to the Olympic Games (Willing & Pappalardo, 2023) and with this, it is gaining legitimacy and respect among the broader public and certain stakeholders. Despite this newfound prestige, skateboarders remain situated in a symbolic "grey space", caught between their celebration as legitimate athletes and their ongoing stigmatization as urban vandals (O'Connor et al., 2025). Street skateboarding has also been a part of cities for the past 30 years with plenty of exposure. Skate urbanism and hybrid skate spots have been on the rise (Borden, 2019).

I argue that some of the new legendary spots may be hybrid, as this affords the spot with longevity in its design and its expected maintenance. A perfect example of this is the Benthemplein Water Plaza in Rotterdam, Landhausplatz in Innsbruck (Borden, 2019) as well as the many hybrid spots in Copenhagen, such as Superkilen or Israels Plads. This new wave could also bring more cultural representation as they could be scattered across the entire globe, slowly changing the dominating Western/Global North representation (Borden, 2019; O'Connor et al., 2025). On the other hand, the decentralized video coverage on platforms such as Instagram may cause new legendary spots to be celebrated more locally, highlighting the grassroots communities, or for their significance in the skateboarding culture to be dispersed (Borden, 2019; O'Connor, 2020).

* * *

Author's Bio:

Ema Ostřížková is a 24yo skater based in Prague. She co-filmed and produced her first skate video with in 2024 and released a companion zine of the same name (É Nois Caraio) in 2025. In the same year, she graduated from Media Studies at Charles University with her thesis covering women's experiences with Instagram-based skate communities within the broader topic of inclusivity in skateboarding. She is currently doing her master's degree in the same field a Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. Outside of skateboarding, she focuses on fashion design and co-creates an upcycling brand Malé Socky. You can reach her at: emanaost@gmail.com

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New-Traditional Skateboarding

Harry Meadley

This article proposes the concept of 'new-traditional skateboarding' through an autoethnographic account of a skate session at Southbank, London – one of the world's most symbolically laden skate spots. Drawing on Southbank's contested history, the article traces how a convergence of factors during the Social Skate Summit (2026) produced a moment in which non-traditional skateboarders visibly dominated a peak-time session at a traditionally exclusionary site. Foregrounding the reclamatory groundwork of the London Skate Mums and skate photographer Norma Ibarra – whose lens brings the value-creating mechanisms of traditional skate media into non-traditional spaces – this article argues that a layering of permissive space, diverse community, and traditional ritual with non-traditional conviviality generated something qualitatively new: not a neutralisation of skateboarding's critical edge, but an expansion of who gets to embody it. New-traditional skateboarding is offered as a reparative framework through which a tradition of exclusion becomes, however partially, a tradition of inclusion.

* * *

Southbank, London, 24 May 2026

"Southbank", or the Undercroft of the Southbank Centre in London, is among the world's most well-known skate spots. Highly documented within both skate media and skateboard academia, it functions as a recurring example within the Lefebvrean framework for understanding skateboarding as an urban practice established by Iain Borden (2001; 2019). The Undercroft 'is very probably the oldest place in the world which has been subjected to skateboarding in a continuous and intensive manner' (Borden 2015). It is a 'grey space' (O'Connor et al. 2023), both a highly polluted site and one full of ambiguities and contradictions.

The contested redevelopment of the Undercroft in the mid-2010s generated its own scholarly literature: Madgin et al. (2018) consider it a 'found space', suggesting that its value lies in the cumulative lived experience of its users; Warin (2018) argues that the Long Live Southbank community group's resistance to relocation demonstrates it as an 'invented space' in which skaters claim a form of citizenship; and Ruiz et al. (2019) examines how the campaign transforms the Undercroft into a 'political space', through which a subcultural community successfully engages with heritage discourse and civic activism. Mould (2014) even framed the 27,000 planning objections received by the local council as a fight not just for Southbank, but for the right to the city itself. The resistance succeeded, with Long Live Southbank (2020) achieving a £1.1m restoration and extension, transforming the Undercroft into a permanently open and legally protected skate space.

Switching now to a more autoethnographic mode – and recognising that all of the above contribute to Southbank as both a mythical and magical site for skateboarding – I have never been a fan. From my positionality as someone born in the North of

Houda Ait Lahcen, boneless, Southbank, 24.5.26 by Norma Ibarra.

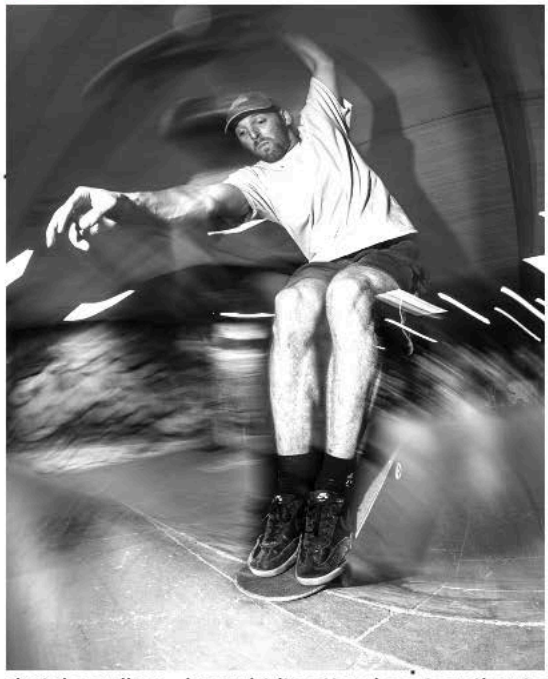
England in the wake of Thatcherism, I am the recipient of a deep social conditioning that has left me with a very conscious bias against the South of England, and in particular London. The first time I ever skated Southbank, as a teenager in the early 2000s, my friend was mugged and his video camera stolen along with our precious skate footage. In the early 2010s, as a recent graduate from a regional art school, like many others, I somewhat resentfully moved to London due to its cultural and socio-economic dominance. During my few years living there I skated Southbank occasionally, usually experiencing the exclusionary practice of 'vibing' (Barrow 2018) – the embodied and vernacular practice of social regulation within traditional skate culture often used to distinguish between "locals", and those who are not welcome. More practically, I also found the alienating height of the skateable ledges – *Moving Units* (2004) and *Units Moved* (2006), installed by the Side Effects of Urethane artist collective – rather frustrating to skate. This is to say, whatever understandable reverence others had for Southbank, it only fed my confirmation bias against it.

Southbank persisted in my mind as a metonym for the male-dominated, hyperable, and dare I say

conservative, version of skateboarding that I increasingly felt at odds with. Yet in my absence, the Long Live Southbank era of the mid to late 2010s and the connected conference Pushing Boarders (2018) fed into what Indigo Willing and Anthony Pappalardo (2023) have since characterised as the 'ethical turn' of skateboarding; and so it was with hesitant interest that I found myself returning to skate the Undercroft some 15 years later as part of the programme for the Social Skate Summit[1]. What occurred was a truly magical skate session, with this text serving as an attempt to begin unravelling that experience.

After a full day of passionate and affecting panel talks, the Social Skate Summit – a women-led skate festival/conference convened around socially engaged global skate projects and progressive thinking within

Nyaï Aidlin, nose stall, Southbank, 24.5.26 by Norma Ibarra.



skateboarding – brought its attendees together to collectively skate the Undercroft, with free admission also given to the self-historicising *Skate 50* exhibition at the Southbank Centre. London was experiencing a rare spring heatwave; the shadows of the Undercroft offered much respite. As the evening progressed, the Social Skate Summit attendees began to congregate in the smaller section of the Undercroft that formed part of the skate space expansion in 2019. This square area features a long, small original bank along one side and a row of installed concrete barriers along the other; ontologically it occupies a complex position between authentic skate spot and constructed skate space. It is very much a "beginners' area" in comparison to the well documented larger banks, stairs and ledges of the main section, but on this occasion, became the arena for a rapturous and highly inclusive skate session that achieved the sort of ineffable sensation one might otherwise conceptualise as magical. There is a certain quality to the energy of an actively inclusive and gender diverse street skating session that takes place within traditional skate spots – it is both reclamatory and, in Sedgwick's (2003) sense of the term, reparative: a turn away from the paranoid logic of exclusion that has historically defined the space, and toward the active nurturing of new possibility.

Useful to our understanding of this dynamic are the terms 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' skateboarders (Delardi 2021). Adopted to distinguish between the predominantly male 'core' (Dupont 2014) and those historically marginalised from the formation of skate culture, one might argue that the very necessity of these terms reveal skateboard culture as being a tradition of exclusion. But what does this mean for the skate spot? Within traditional skateboarding, singular skate spots can gain significance through not just skateability or sociality, but association. An influential skater can imbue a skate spot with meaning through the documented performance of notable tricks; Casper Brooker and Jacob Harris' skate video *Cathedral* (nikeskateboarding 2022) is a notable example of such veneration of Southbank. Through the romanticising lens of skateboard media, a magical trick or mythical skater can seemingly enchant a skate spot with a form of aura – curiously inverting Walter Benjamin's (1935/2008) classic notion, since in skateboarding it is through documentation and reproduction that such presence accrues, rather than diminishes. If the aura of a skate spot is at least in part generated by skate media, and that media is the primary mechanism through which skateboarding's exclusionary tradition has been established (Porter 2025), one might question what meaning such spots hold for non-traditional skaters. Enter London Skate Mums…

Concurrent to our Sunday evening skate session, Channel 4 News broadcast a national feature on the *Skate 50* exhibition at the Southbank Centre (Stephenson 2026). Half of the four-minute segment was dedicated to the regular user group of self-titled "skate mums" whose presence at Southbank has drawn international media attention (Lobe 2026; Stanford 2026). Existing beyond the insularity of traditional skate media, London Skate Mums have been a countervailing force redefining both the Undercroft and perceptions of skateboarders more broadly; best exemplified in the film *Southbank – Beyond The Stereotype* (Roussel and Sherlock 2026), featured within *Skate 50*. Adding whole new layers of meaning to both skateboarding and motherhood (Sayers 2022), the perceived contradictions of these positions arguably generate a new level of "cool" beyond the affordances of traditional skateboarding.

non-traditional leadership with traditional allyship, captured through a traditional lens held by a non-traditional hand – that made such an enchantment possible. In consciously avoiding the self-romanticisation one might equally critique traditional skate media for, it is necessary to acknowledge that such a moment was also only achievable through the financial and organisational support of the Social Skate Summit, alongside the ongoing defiance labour (Willing and Pappalardo 2023) and safety work (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020) of both the organisers and non-traditional attendees. Such moments are rare, but through situated enactment they conjure imaginaries for future versions of skateboarding – ones built on an entirely new tradition: a tradition of inclusion.

New-traditional skateboarding is not, however, a reconciliation that neutralises skateboarding's critical edge. It is instead a rapprochement; one that expands what skateboarding's radicality can mean, and crucially, who gets to embody it. What was taking place that Sunday evening at Southbank was not just a reclamation of space, but of the very mechanisms through which skateboarding accrues meaning. New-traditional skateboarding takes the most potent elements of what skateboarding has always done – claimed space, created community, made something from nothing – and turns that same logic on the culture itself. Southbank has always been many things to many people. What it became that Sunday evening, however briefly, was something it had never quite managed before: a space that belonged to everyone.

* * *

Bio: Harry Meadley is an artist and Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Leeds School of Arts, Leeds Beckett University. They created the inclusive skate festival *Civic Skateboarding* (2023), co-directed the documentary *Where Do You Want Us?* (w/ Sarah Oglesby, 2024), and their PhD *The Art of Skating Institutions* (2025) used socially engaged art practice to support making street spots safer and more inclusive for marginalised skateboarders.

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Skate Urbanism and the Disenchantment of Skateboarding's Magical Senses, Skills, and Spots

Brian Glenney

In this paper I pose twin paradoxes about Skate Urbanism. 1) its process of collaborating with city officials and 2) its production of sanctioned skateable spaces desensitizes skateboarding's creative-bearing senses and deskills counterpolitical capacities that give value to the city and underwrite the very political leverage that makes Skate Urbanism possible.

The fucking city is run by pigs.
Taking the rights away from all the kids.
Understanding we are fighting a war we can't win.
They hate us, we hate them. We can't win no way.

-Black Flag, "Police Story"

* * *

Intro: Seattle's New "Planter Politics"

Seattle's Westlake Plaza is a fulcrum of Northwest US street skateboarding since the late 80s (Image 1). Westlake is a magical spot spoken of in fabled stories and reverence.

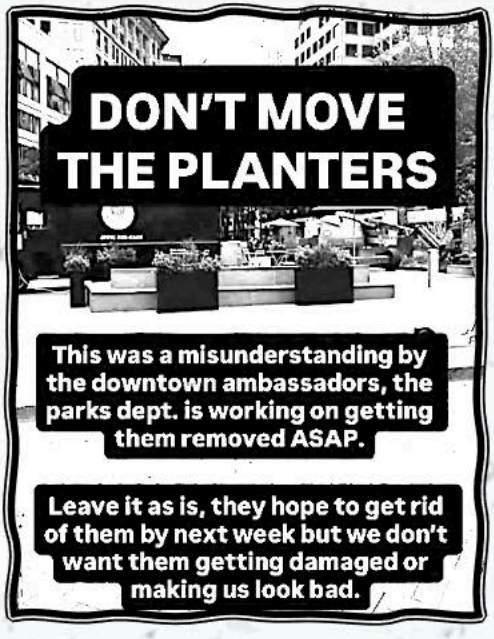
1: Heavy crew at Westlake's 3 Block in 1988; author middle right.

Throughout the early 1990s, Westlake was heavily policed: security would often take boards and police would issue fines. In 1996, planters were installed to obstruct skating the blocks as a ledge. For 30 years, skaters would move or break the planter, or use the planter as an obstacle to skate. (See Image 2)

2: Russell Looby beefing the planter in 2022. Photo by author

In Spring 2026, 35 years later, the city destroyed the large granite block and with the help of skate advocates, designed a new smaller granite block for skateboarding, transforming Westlake into a sanctioned skate space. And yet, large planters continue to obstruct different parts of the new granite block at different times. A new kind of "planter politics" has now emerged where admired skaters seek to protect the planters, even as the city uses them to control the uses

3: Instagram story reposted by trusted local Seattle skaters


DON'T MOVE THE PLANTERS
This was a misunderstanding by the downtown ambassadors, the parks dept. is working on getting them removed ASAP.
Leave it as is, they hope to get rid of them by next week but we don't want them getting damaged or making us look bad.

As the planters move to different areas around the new granite block, they aim to control how the granite block is used or not used by skaters. However, as in the past, skaters have incorporated the planters into their use of the granite block, treating the planters as opportunities rather than obstructions. (Image 4) This (mis)use of the planters by way of trick play suggests that, while sanctioned, this space continues to produce counterpolitical activism, re-enchanting the space to become a spot. With each new planter variation of the skate space comes new opportunities for interpretation. Soon, I suspect, the planters will themselves become obstacles for grinding and sliding and will likely break, requiring a response from the city, likely in the form of more robust or knobbed planters, or some similar hostile architecture.

4: Levi Glenney reappropriates an obstructing planter Photo: Russell Looby

What does Seattle's planter politics reveal about deeper tensions of skaters using political processes to produce sanctioned skate spaces? Other famous plazas, like Philadelphia's Love Park and San Francisco's EMB, have been redesigned to be hostile to skating, while other spots like San Francisco's UN Plaza have been designed to include obstacles and spaces to attract skating. Westlake's new planter-blocked granite block offers a kind of hybrid sanctioned space, perhaps producing a new hybrid of political negotiation and counterpolitics that I wish to explore further.

The new Westlake and its planter politics exemplifies the paradox of skate advocacy, also known as "Skate Urbanism," to produce sanctioned skate spaces. This advocacy undermines the very leverage that underwrites skating's creative value.

Skateboarding's Counterpolitics

Singapore is a city with one of the densest and most controlled populations in the world. Juxtapose a planned "Fitness Corner" that sits empty and a group of skaters grinding a skillfully rub-bricked and waxed granite ledge nearby who soon leave to evade police. "These two sites offer an extreme contrast: ordered versus disruptive, planned versus improvised, permanent versus fleeting, sanctioned versus insurgent." (McDuie-Ra: 5) McDuie-Ra's contrast between politically planned spaces and counterpolitical spots exemplifies the paradox of Skate Urbanism.

Skateboarding's value is its spots, which are counterpolitical challenges to property rights, surveillance, inaccessibility, and imposed order. These challenges create social bonds and produce a culture of meaning that can almost be called "magical." This magic is not found when negotiating, planning, and designing sanctioned structures.

Counterpolitical production of space creates the distinctive magical capacities in skaters to see and enchant ordinary city spaces with extraordinary meaning: a "city craft." (Holsgens and Glenney 2024)

These "magical" capacities also uniquely fit the individualized "know how" of a skater's style and ability (Buckareff and Glenney 2026). When these capacities are unleashed in a city, they produce extraordinary enchanting cultural centers of creativity, from the magical spots of EMB to Love Park to MACBA that have become near-religious sites of pilgrimage for skaters, historicized and fetishized by the "This Old Ledge" series.

The Ecological Trap of Skate Urbanism

New sanctioned skate spaces, like the new Westlake block, can be like "poisoned gifts," *cadeau empoisoné*. The city's control disenchants the magic of skatespots and designing obstacles deprograms the skater's eye and deskills their city craft for maintaining them. These spaces are comparatively sterile and homogeneous, de-styling aesthetics into athletics. The sanctioned skate spaces of Skate Urbanism diminish and degrade the very processes and means of production that ground skateboarding's value to the city.

This critique follows Mould (2015): a sanctioned "creative" city "eats itself," stunting the innovation and decreasing the very diversity it is attempting to attract. Similarly, when creative cities restrict graffiti to sanctioned "street art," they sterilize the subversion of social and political norms that underwrite graffiti's creative acts. The *unsanctioned* creative city is striated, folded in a Mandelbrot Set of many meanings.

Skate Urbanism's sanctioned skate spaces are like what conservationists call an "ecological trap," a habitat preferred by an animal in spite of it diminishing that animal's fitness for survival. (Battin 2004). Bird feeders and landfills attract huge numbers of insects, birds, and mammals while also desensitizing and deskilling their natural survival capacities, producing generational deficits and eventual extinction.

Sanctioned skate spaces are Disneyland-like simulacra, promoting passive consumption of city spaces. Control of these spaces by the city, such as through planter placement to prevent skating new granite block translate to simple "misunderstandings" and other politically negotiated relations rather than the insurrectionist readings interpreted by a counterpolitical skill set.

Skate Urbanism's processes and production of skate spaces fail to have a magically transformative effect because they do not produce a genuine environment for skateboarders, but rather a kind of Disneyland simulacra pixy dust. (Baudrillard 1994)

By contrast, unsanctioned skate spots promote a "learning to learn," that can only be acquired in "genuine environments" through "experiential learning."[2] (Dewey 2000, 15) "Learning to learn" environments must *not* be "pre-formed" or "too resolved" or "complete" lest they risk, "arrested development, a passive accommodation." (55) To learn is to create new meaning. "The adult uses his powers to transform his environment, thereby occasioning new stimuli which redirect his powers and keep them developing." (p. 55) The "genuine environment" of the city demands active appropriation by skaters to transform use and meaning, subverting the passive uses of street architecture into creative trick play.

Cognitive Offloading of Skate Urbanism

The skater's eye is a kind of "cognitive gadget," (Heyes 2018) a socially-embedded capacity that enables activities based on the recognition of specific patterns in an environment. Other cognitive gadgets including reading books and foraging for wild mushrooms, requiring significant emplaced learning experiences and continued practice. So too the skater's eye is a trait programmed often by years of on-site use and recursive feedback from various instructional medias like skate photos and films.

Similar to reading a challenging book like *Infinite Jest* or foraging for often buried Matsutake mushrooms in the deep forests of Oregon, performing a unique trick that fits a found skate space and the style of the skater promotes a kind of authenticity and "flow" that provides fulfilment and enchanting joy (Seifert and Hedderson 2010) and sharing photographs and filmed clips of these magical performances is the basis of skate culture. Like the challenge of reading a difficult book or finding a hidden wild mushroom, the greater the risk faced by a skater in these performances, the greater their sense of

[2] In learning an action, instead of having it given ready-made, one of necessity learns to vary its factors, to make varied combinations of them, according to change of circumstances…The human being acquires a habit of learning. He learns to learn. (p. 50)

agency and self-realization in their trick performances, and the more creative and authentic their culture becomes.

Cognitive Gadget Offloading and Hybridization

Cognitive gadgets like reading, foraging, and finding skate spots are difficult tasks entrained by massively focused cognitive loading and countless hours of practice. This inefficiency promotes the use of various 'cheats,' tools and processes that alleviate inefficiency. For instance, some wild species of mushroom such as Oyster, Shiitake, and Lion's Mane are domesticated by matching their otherwise "natural" diet with coffee grounds, sawdust, and straw, sterilizing their flavor.

So too, Large Language Models (LLMs) can facilitate cognitive offloading, but produce "Artificial Ignorance" as they decrease active cognitive engagement, diminishing reading skills, a deficit known as "cognitive debt." (Armitage 2025). LLM uses for reading are likened to "fast fashion for the mind," that "replace authentic, original thinking with averaged out beige, boring platitudes," a kind of "ersatz thinking." LLMs, "peddle frictionless low-quality products that cater to the lowest common denominator, with a homogenizing effect." (Lévesque 2026: 1-2) Insofar as Skate Urbanism's sanctioned skate spaces are analogous to LLMs, they are a danger to skateboarding's counterpolitical street senses and skills.

Conclusion

Kilberth (2025) insightfully suggests that Skate Urbanism is less a theory or practice, and more a result of two cultural shifts: 1) cities, particularly in Europe, now recognize the need to support creative cultures to compete in the global market and 2) creative cultures like skateboarding now recognized for their centrality to city life are maturing and able to reciprocate political negotiation with cities, with leaders like Leo and Gustav who are taking responsibility for co-creating skate-friendly cities.

Co-created sanctioned skate spaces are also being adopted by skateboarding's more "core" medias. Kyron McGrath-Davis graces the cover of a recent *Free Skateboard Magazine* (Issue 66) with a frontside air gapping two banked monoliths designed and built as a "shared space" by a group of Skate Urbanists in London.[3] This is a shift in skate media away from photos of skateboarders performing tricks in often gritty "illegal skate spots," photos that help train and maintain the skater's eye. (D'Orazio, 2020)

Skate Urbanism, according to Kilberth (2025), serves as a negotiation between stigmatized "illegal street spot" forms of skateboarding, where found spots are often criminalized and skate stopped, and skatepark creation, commonly criticized for its fenced-in panoptical security and the expatriation of skaters from the city, spaces used by skaters but often reviled by skate medias. As suggested by the cover of *Free*, skaters are finding Skate Urbanism's spaces to be the sweet spot between illegal DIY skate spot skating and legal city-governed fenced-in park-based approaches, a popularity that has led to "opportunities of spatial concepts that "reintegrate" skateboarding back into the public realm as structurally more integrated and inclusive spaces in the city." (Kilberth 2025, 1) **But, as argued above, this hybrid sweet spot may be an ecological trap that leads to incapacitating skater senses and skills entrained in unsanctioned skate spots, domesticating an otherwise "wild" skate culture so that cities can "cultivate" whatever is left of their creativity for gentrification, depriving skateboarding of its crucial niche and value to a city's urban ecology.**

This cognitive offloading gadget argument against Skate Urbanism, like arguments against LLMs and domesticating otherwise wild mushrooms, involves questions of risk assessment and trade-offs. After all, skate

[3] Thanks to Thom Callan for putting me on to this example.

spots are not mushrooms and top-down political negotiations are not the same as using LLMs: these are mere analogies with more or less relevant connections. Skate Urbanism's new processes promote access and inclusivity at the cost of crafting street-trained senses and skills. Furthermore, while there is some initial evidence that LLMs harm the senses and skills of reading, there is only circumstantial and anecdotal evidence that sanctioned skate spaces deskill skateboarders. The recent cover of *Free* hardly suggests that sanctioned skate spaces will overtake the tradition of unsanctioned skate spots and related training of skater senses and skills.

Upshot

The successes of Skate Urbanism should be evaluated by more than the quantity of new skate spaces, new skaters, and the inclusion of marginalized skaters, all of which will surely benefit skate culture and the city. Skate Urbanism should also be evaluated insofar as it is able to reproduce the ecological conditions to entrain and enskill, serving a crucial ecological role of insurgent play in the city that that cannot be replicated in simulacra sanctioned skate spaces. The "planter politics" of Westlake Plaza disrupts its simulacra, transporting its meaning into the *real* ecological conditions that underwrite skateboarding's creative value to the city.

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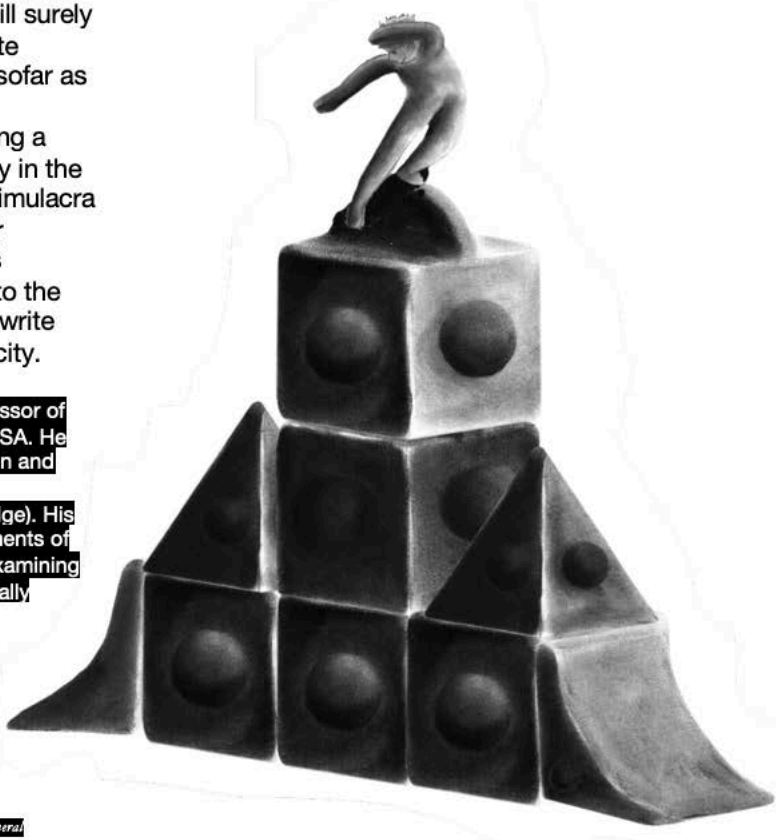

The "Real Non-Fiction" of Magic Skate-spots

Ted Barrow

* * *

It should come as no surprise to anyone that I grew up obsessed with skate spots, primarily Embarcadero. I was born in northern California, and fortunate enough to spend every summer and most winters in Bolinas and San Francisco. I spent a few weeks in the summer of 1992, after having studied Mike Carroll's "Questionable" video, skating and lurking around Embarcadero, enduring the intimidation, real and imagined, ridicule, and technical trick progression that is now the stuff of legend. When I got back to Austin, my crew of friends imagined that we were skate-gangsters just like our heroes in San Francisco: we spent more time on the street, skated more brick and tile-surfaced spots than we should have, and did our best to emulate the EMB crew, with whom I probably had the closest, most up-to-date contact. whether or not our lives were anything like those that we glimpsed in videos of Embarcadero is, well, *questionable.*

It's safe to say that, through the example of those videos shot at that place, we all inherited and internalized class-based, racialized, and gendered pathologies both good and bad. by emulating people who didn't look like us in videos that largely elided women, we began to think differently about. how we related to the world, using those videos and those skaters as a template. But then we all grew up, and the thought of emulating Mike Carroll, our hero at 15, seemed a lot less cool by the time I turned 17.

Further, skateboarding itself evolved, and soon my own sites shifted from wannabe EMB to looking for the pink granite surfaces that recalled what I saw of DC's Pulaski. One weekend, I found a set of high pink granite planters in front of a windowless state building near the capital. The planter ledges reminded me of Freedom Plaza, where people like Pep Martinez, Andy Stone, and Reese Forbes did tech tricks on what seemed like impossibly high stone ledges. This mini-plaza was obviously nothing like DC but became so to me through my own desire. I imagined myself skating Pulaski, increasingly alone, as none of my other friends in Austin really liked that spot.

By the time I turned 20, I had largely outgrown that attachment to one skate spot, and one approach to skateboarding. I was not alone. The type of skateboarding that had incubated through centripetal force in the plazas of the early 90's was in a diasporic moment, and the focus shifted from canonical west-coast spots to exotic east coast and European locales, and the middle part of the decade featured a lot of street skating down regular streets. This arguably began with Stereo's "A Visual Sound," continued through 40's "Amigos," and reached some kind of apotheosis between Dan Wolfe's Eastern Exposure 3 (1996) and Real Skateboards's 1997 "Non-Fiction," where Keith Hufnagel, Quim Cardona, Mark Gonzales and others skate increasingly non-descript spots. Something about that video challenged the primacy of spot-centric videos of the past. Seeing Mark Gonzales weightlessly glide down the Sunset strip, weaving in and out of traffic and flying off of curb cuts is about as close to "real magic" as I can imagine.

Returning to the title of the talk, "Real" is both brand and commitment to empirical reality, no? *Real* I get, but what do we mean when we talk about *magic* in skate spots? Does it have to do with tricks? Is it somehow alchemical? Could it be social, as if the fact that people who share a passion for something that is both fun and rigorous can lead to lasting bonds and a greater sense of kinship? Are we calling that magic now? Before I go any further with whatever potential for magic that skateboarding may have, let's try to historicize what we might mean by magic itself.

Marc Johnson, more poignantly relevant than ever, offered one answer in his famous Cliff Kauffman story:

> *The craziest thing about skateboarding is you can say 'what if?' You can say 'What*

if I can do this? I think I can probably do this,' and you can do it. You can take something that was pure thought and make it reality, because that's just the way it is

Johnson describes something extraordinary, not magic. To imagine a thing and then to bring that thing into existence through repeated effort, doggedness, and sometimes dumb luck can feel miraculous, sure, and yet I am not convinced that this is magic but something closer to discipline, imagination, and will.

Then again, magical thinking and tricks have been central to skateboarding. We perform tricks, and the lay audience often cannot understand how those tricks are done. If we're fortunate, we mask our process through the grace of our performance. But every magician knows that the trick itself is part practice, part con: the impossible effect is produced through repetition, rehearsal, and technique. What appears supernatural on stage is usually the product of punishing labor performed elsewhere. The beautiful sausage of our nose-pick is made with bloody knuckles and shredded shins.

To paraphrase Dolly Parton's "it costs a lot of money to look this cheap" zinger, ours might be *"you gotta try really hard to not look like a try-hard!"* But even this isn't "real magic," it's just explaining how hard things sometimes look easy.

This might be as good a time as ever to examine historical moments when magic, fetishism, and aura might converge in a way that is relevant to skate-spots. Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Walter Benjamin all grappled with same problem under a different name. For Lévi-Strauss, magic was a symbolic system through which we organized reality, while for Benjamin, the language became that of aura: the strange quality that allows an object or place to feel charged with significance beyond its physical presence. With Karl Marx, fetishism describes the way social relationships become disguised within objects. For Freud, the fetish is a repository for displaced desire, like how I fetishized Pulaski at my sad lonely sunbaked pink planters in Texas. Each thinker tried to explain why humans imbue certain objects, places, symbols, and practices with powers exorbitant of their material reality.

Of this cherry-picked genealogy, "aura" and "fetish" might be the most germane to our discussion of magic in skateboarding. Take Benjamin's aura. I have never been entirely persuaded by his famous definition of aura as "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be." The phrase is evocative, certainly, but also frustratingly vague. When applied to skateboarding, aura often becomes a way of describing the feeling that famous spots possess some special quality. Love Park. South Bank. Pulaski. Brooklyn Banks. EMB. But does EMB possess some kind of magic beyond what we make of it?

IDK.

What makes a skate spot meaningful is rarely the spot itself, but is the accumulation of use, which results in the stories we tell. The photographs, videos, community of rivals and chosen family, the countless hours spent waiting, failing, trying again, and simply lurking. This significance doesn't emanate from the granite or concrete of the spot, but it is created almost by consensus by all of us.

This is why I have always been uncomfortable with claims that my work fetishizes skate spots. Perhaps I used to, but not now.

The word fetish carries a long and complicated history, with its origins in Portuguese and Dutch European colonists to describe supposedly magical objects encountered elsewhere, it later became a central concept for the widgets of Marx and the naughty bits of Freud. In every version, however, fetishism involves attributing powers

to an object that obscures the human relationships behind it.

That is precisely the opposite of what want to do with "This Old Ledge:" within the limited range of things I can talk about; my goal is not to reify the spots or lionize the locals, but to demystify them. When I investigate the history of a plaza, identify its architect, trace its design influences, document its construction, or explain why skateboarders gathered there, I am not attempting to transform the place into a sacred relic, nor big-up Mies van der Rohe. I am attempting to return it to its capacious social history. We all know that some dumb, inert ledge doesn't possesses magical powers even if it grinds well. The point is that skateboarders found a use for it. It's the grinder, not the grinded. Skateboarders do not uncover magical places. We create meaningful places through use, and meaning changes momentarily.

When I examine at a Late Modernist plaza, a failed civic space, or a forgotten piece of street furniture, if I'm feelin' high-falutin', I'd like to think I'm more in line with Benjamin's *Arcades Project:* not because I am searching for hidden magic but because I am just interested in how people use places and how those uses change over time. Both projects emerge from the same impulse, fostered in my PhD program in art history: to understand the flimsy present through the exorbitant material stockpiles of the past.

The patina left by our skateboards on a curb is not the magic part of it, attractive as it may be. Nor does the magic reside in architecture, or in some mystical aura surrounding famous locations. If there is magic in skateboarding, it exists in the social world skateboarders create together; it is sustained in the transformation of ordinary space through collective imagination, and remains in the ability of a group of people to establish their own values, their own shifting hierarchies, and their own systems of significance within spaces never intended for those purposes. The friendships, communities, and shared experiences that emerge wherever skateboarders gather, and especially where we roam, testify to this.

Perhaps this is why attempts to theorize skateboarding through magic often leave me unsatisfied. Skateboarding emerged after the Enlightenment, after industrialization, after Modernity, after many of the intellectual traditions that reified the concepts of aura, fetishism, and magic in their classical forms. Skateboarding is a postmodern activity practiced amid the ruins of those older systems of meaning, our realest connection to magic without the magical thinking.

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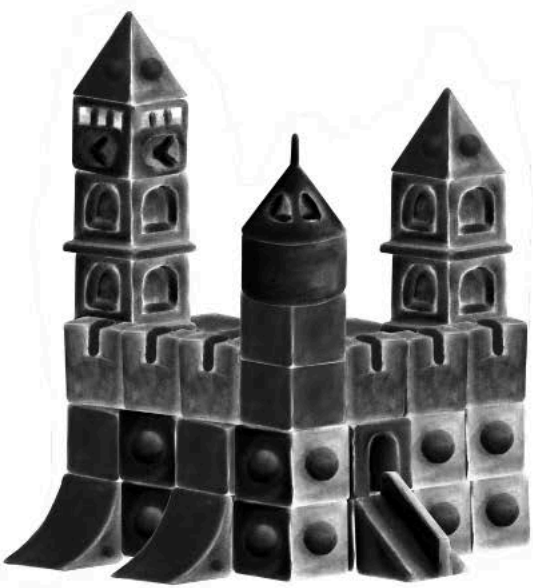

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SKATEHOLDERS

FORUM 2026

Ema Ostřížková,

Harry Meadley,

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